Vestal Virgin

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In ancient Rome, the Vestals or **Vestal Virgins** (Latin: Vestālēs, singular Vestālis [wɛsˈtaːlɪs]) were priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. These individuals cultivated the sacred fire that was not allowed to go out. Vestals were freed of the usual social obligations to marry and bear children and took a 30-year vow of chastity in order to devote themselves to the study and correct observance of state rituals forbidden to the colleges of male priests.

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From the central fire which they tended, the altars of other gods obtained their fires, and even distant colonies were not held to be consecrated until their own altar fires were lighted with fire from the central hearth.

Quotes

- Once, on the Cælian Hill, on the very morning of my full consecration, I learned that it was sweet to be loved. My woman's heart told me that this was the woman's highest heritage—to be the beloved of a brave, good man. In a vision, as with a lightning flash, I seemed to see a fair landscape stretched out before me, where there was the song of rejoicing and the happiness which comes of a mutual love. Then a cloud swept over it, blotting it from my sight, and I was on a mountain top, so high above others—a Vestal Virgin, devoted to the service of the goddess; high above others—yes, high—but how cold! how lonely! Rumours of the wickedness of the city reached me—foul deeds, which made me blush for the women who took part in them. Emperors and great ones fell; Christians were not exempt from the love of change; there were dissensions amongst them; there were envies, and hatreds, and heartburnings amongst their leaders.
  - Attributed to Vestal Hyacintha Severa, in *The Story of the Lost Vestal*, by Emma Marshal, (htm) (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/62548/62548-h/62548-h.htm), (1886)

Quotes about

- In the old Rome, which is so continually brought to the surface from the covering dust of centuries, there can scarcely be a figure round which so much interest might be supposed to gather as round the nameless statue of the Vestal, whose story imagination may supply in many colours and in many forms—each one, for himself, as he stands before it, may clothe it

as he will. But that of the noble, earnest soul struggling towards the Light, and rising from the dry chrysalis of a worn-out faith to the flight of the unimprisoned spirit upward to God — who is the Light — has seemed as full of probability as of charm. And it is easy to believe that a woman like Colia Concordia, herself unable to soar and yet conscious that her aims were after all but earthly and sordid, might grudge one of the most beloved and most highly gifted of the priestesses the unsparing meed of praise which the inscription commemorates. Yet, she might have reflected, if the inscription remained without a name the identity of Hyacintha would never be discovered, and thus the once-honoured and beloved Vestal would be known henceforth only as NUMBER THIRTEEN.

  - *The Story of the Lost Vestal*, by Emma Marshal, (htm) (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/62548/62548-h/62548-h.htm), (1886)

- The second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius, built a beautiful temple, and instituted various religious ceremonies, in honor of Vesta. The loveliest and noblest among the Roman maidens were chosen to serve this goddess, and were known as Vestals, or Vestal Virgins... During their time of servitude, they were expected to keep their vows of chastity and fidelity to their patroness, and to maintain her sacred fire, under penalty of being buried alive in a vaulted chamber... The Vestals were.. so pure and vigilant, that during one thousand years only eighteen failed to keep their vows satisfactorily, and suffered punishment. The Vestal Tuccia was accused of breach of faith, but, as proof of her purity, was given power to carry water in a sieve from the Tiber to the temple.

  - *Myths of Greece and Rome*, H. A. Guerber, (pdf) (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39250/39250-h/39250-h.htm), (1893)

- Before the nuns, who in Christendom were consecrated to the Virgin Mary, there were the Vestal Virgins of Rome, the maidens of Isis in Egypt, and the Devadasis of the Hindu temples... From the central fire which they tended, the altars of other gods obtained their fires, and even distant colonies were not held to be consecrated until their own altar fires were lighted with fire from the central hearth. Compared with this cult in other parts of the world, especially in India where originally there was a lofty worship requiring the completest chastity and renunciation of the devadasis or nachnis of the temples, the cult in Rome, despite worldliness, seems to have suffered less degeneration than might have been expected from the theoretical and actual power surrounding it.

  - *Encyclopedic Theosophical Glossary*, *Theosophical University Press,* G. de Purucker, (htm (https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/etgloss/etg-hp.htm)), (1999)

- The vestals vowed to live in chastity for the thirty years their tenure lasted. As compensation they had many privileges not given to ordinary Roman women... The vestal virgins lived in the House of the Vestal Virgins on the Forum Romanum, near the Temple of Vesta. The order of the vestals was disbanded in 394 CE, when non-Christian cults were banned.

  - *Vestal Virgins, The Only Female Priesthood in Rome*, René Seindal (2003)

- The Vestal virgin has forever been an image of a woman draped in white priestly garments, carrying herself with an air of purity and near divinity. The Vestal's image is one that has captured the imagination of writers, painters, sculptures and scholars for centuries. However this near divine woman is more than what she appears. The Vestal was more than a virgin; she was the daughter, mother and priestess of Rome herself. Behind this "glamorous" image is a strong, influential, pious and powerful woman who has sacrificed her sexuality and familial ties for not just the service of the Goddess Vesta but also to reap the rewards that such devotion

sowed.

  - *The Power of Virginity: The Political Position and Symbolism of Ancient Rome's Vestal Virgin*, By Kathryn Ann Wagner, Western Oregon University, (pdf (https://web.archive.org/web/20170517013907if_/http://www.wou.edu:80/history/files/2015/08/Kathryn-Wagner1.pdf)) (Spring 2010)

- These connections to the divine in later years show a distinct desire to maintain position amongst the young priestesses as part tutor and part mystic. This triple image of maid, mother and crone all intricately bond the temple of Vesta together though virginity, fertility, and spirituality. These elements combined created an institution that still fascinates historians today... Though a simple sacrifice of perpetual chastity; the Vestal was able to empower not only herself politically and financially, but also empower the Roman Empire as a whole. It is important to see the connections of a virgin matron and the mother of a nation, and through this connection see and understand what made the Vestal virgins so influential and powerful.
  - *The Power of Virginity: The Political Position and Symbolism of Ancient Rome's Vestal Virgin*, By Kathryn Ann Wagner, Western Oregon University, (Spring 2010)

See also

- Esotericism
- Mysticism
- Vesta (mythology)

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